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**Evaluating the use of synoptic assessment to  
engage and develop lower level Higher  
Education students within a Further  
Education setting**

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Jane Southall & Hilary Wason  
Kingston Business School  
j.southall@kingston.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Engaging less academically qualified Higher Education students being taught within a Further Education setting, who have weaker study skills and little experience of independent learning, is challenging. Confidence and motivation levels are often low and they feel overwhelmed. Effective assessment design is crucial and needs to capitalise on synergies within taught content and reduce the assessment burden in the first semester whilst allowing for early feedback and feedforward. Synoptic assessment which, in this instance, addresses learning outcomes from two modules, has been piloted and evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative data. Results show a number of benefits; students find it engaging and have developed independent learning skills in the areas of research and self-management; staff have seen an improvement in collaborative working, the use of appropriate sources and writing in a focussed way and have benefitted from a reduced marking load.

**Key words**

Synoptic assessment; holistic curriculum; engagement; first generation students.

**Introduction**

Changes in its relationship with a local post-1992 university meant that the Higher Education (HE) Business School of a Further Education (FE) college had the opportunity to redevelop its Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business. Previously, module content and assessments were developed by the university and delivered in the college setting to students who had not achieved the requirements to enter the university programme. Following this change, the college had to develop its own programme specification and study methods and assessments could be developed that were much more suited to the needs of lower level learners, who, despite the additional support and guidance provided by smaller groups and more contact time provided within an FE setting, were struggling to transition to HE.

The reasons for their struggle can be partly attributed to the 'massification' of HE (Johnston, 2011) and the subsequent 'wide-ification' of it (Morgan, 2012). Students are arriving with a different learning experience and skill set from previous generations, having studied in a secondary educational environment where there tends to be less time devoted to reflection and encouragement to learn autonomously and more to 'spoon feeding' information to pass exams (Pokorny and Pokorny, 2005; Haggis, 2006; Greene, 2011). Many have not pursued the traditional, exam-based route to HE study and enter with a range of more practical qualifications that have been completed via the submission of course work. For those from this background who are also the first in their family to enter HE, or the first in their family to enter HE in Britain, the move can be likened to entering an 'alien' environment (Askham, 2008).

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The approaches taken to learning within HE are very different to those used within schools and colleges. As Harwood and Harwood (2004), (cited by Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2008), state, HE teaching is about facilitation, involves less direct teaching and much is student led. New students have stated that they find it hard to learn this way and are overwhelmed by trying to manage their time, work in groups and learn from traditional HE teaching methods such as lectures and seminars. The modularisation of many courses has also created challenges for students with assessment deadlines being grouped together and often accumulated towards the end of semesters or teaching blocks. This can mean that they are unable to produce their best work due to overload (Carless, Joughin and Liu, 2006).

This problem is compounded by the lack of wider support and guidance available to help with this transition as many are first generation HE students and live at home for financial and cultural reasons. Most have part time jobs, some have caring responsibilities and public transport issues mean many spend a significant amount of time travelling each day. Their levels of engagement within the curriculum have been low as measured by attendance (average 45%), participation in sessions and the submission of assessments. In addition, they have a view that HE should be economically relevant (Johnston, 2011) and they aim to *have* a degree at the end of their studies (rather than *be* learners) that will enable them to secure well paid and meaningful employment (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009).

Despite this low level starting point, Chubb (1992, cited in De Vita, 2004) suggests that by the end of their studies, all graduates are expected to have developed attributes such as critical thinking, problem solving, independent thought and skills in "identifying, accessing and managing information' (p.22).

This has resulted in the key questions which this paper aims to address: can engaging and meaningful assessments be developed to engage and develop lower level HE students being taught within an FE setting and can they address intellectual and skills development which should ensure students are better placed to succeed beyond the period of their studies?

### **Method**

A literature review was carried out looking into student engagement, transition to HE, curriculum and assessment design. This is presented below and was used to inform the subsequent curriculum and assessment design.

The evaluation has been carried out using a mixed methods approach with opportunities for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Quantitative data was collected from module results and summary statistics, including attendance rates, completion rates and marks awarded. In addition, questionnaires were used with students to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Focus groups were held with staff in order to understand and assess the impact of the new assessment. A questionnaire was used due to its ease of administration with a student group where most travel long distances to campus, many have part-time jobs, and some have domestic responsibilities. Mixtures of Likert rating scales and open questions allowed students to fully express how they felt the assignment had worked. After trialling a pilot version (n=13), the questionnaire was administered to the remainder of the group (n=48).

Staff involved in the delivery of this assessment (n = 5), were interviewed in a focus group setting, conducted as part of the on-going module and programme evaluation process in order to simplify the attendance requirements for staff with heavy teaching loads (Halkier, 2010). Their comments were recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to preserve the authenticity of the data (Wilson, 2010). Due to the small scale of the study, the data from both the open questions and focus group

were manually coded. Coding, analysis and interpretation were conducted collaboratively within the research team in order to identify and agree the key themes.

This project met the ethical requirements of the institution in question.

## **Literature review**

### *Student Engagement*

There is a vast quantity of literature exploring the concept of Student Engagement. Indeed, for many it has become something of a 'buzzword' (Kahu, 2013, Gibbs, 2014). There is clear evidence that student engagement is complex (Kahu, 2013). In this context, student engagement is being defined as energy, time and resources which students devote to activities designed to enhance learning (Krause, 2007, cited in Bovill, Bulley, Morss, 2011). Bryson and Hand (2007) suggest that it involves a dynamic interaction between the student and their learning environment and they see it as forming a key component in the quest of those working in HE to improve student learning. They also point out the importance of achieving this by assuring the relevance of both *what* and *how* students learn. There is clearly a need for students to develop skills and attributes during their experience of HE that are applicable in the world of work. Despite many working in HE disapproving, students are viewing themselves as consumers of education and as customers of universities and colleges (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009) and accordingly expect to develop in ways that will allow them to secure a meaningful and challenging role in employment.

### *Transition to University*

The importance of ensuring a smooth transition from studying at level three to level four is well documented. It is accepted that such a transition is important as it impacts on students' academic performance as well as on their social life and general sense of wellbeing (Pike and Harrison, 2011). The first few weeks and months as an undergraduate student are often described in emotional terms. The adjective 'traumatic' is much used and students are referred to as experiencing feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness and low self-esteem, stemming from a feeling of not belonging (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011).

Some of this emotional response is due to students struggling with the move away from prescriptive, controlled and supported learning to self-directed knowledge acquisition (Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2013; O'Shea, 2014; Weadon and Baker, 2014). The size of lecture groups, the anonymity of the teaching methods, a lack of clarity about expectations and not understanding how some modules fit within a degree programme are also a problem for many new students (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009; Hughes and Smail, 2013). Specific study skills such as understanding assessment briefs, sourcing appropriate materials and time management are also lacking (Gibney *et al.*, 2011; Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2013).

Johnston (2010) states that universities need to offer students a first year that meets expectations, engages interest and encourages high standards of effort and achievement. He goes on to state that it also needs to empower them for participation in study, employment and lifelong learning. Hughes and Smail (2014) point out that social support and integration were the most important aspects of a smooth transition to HE for the students in their study. Integration was not only confined to peers as contact and support from staff was also cited as being helpful. This need for contact with others is reinforced by Pampaka, Williams and Hutcheson (2012) who found that whilst students felt positive about the need for independent learning and the opportunity to study subjects in depth, the lack of time available to ask questions of teaching staff and for clarification of problem areas made this difficult and challenging.

### **Curriculum Design**

Many studies into curriculum design that assists with transition to HE have focussed on the need to provide remedial help by providing stand-alone, skills based modules or units that address a short fall in study skills (Beder, 1997 and Mitchell, Csavina, and Sweeney, 2002, cited in Bovill, Bulley and Morss, 2011). Some have developed induction or orientation type courses at the start of the year whilst others have suggested optional workshops that do not bear credit. Other studies (Wingate 2006, Groves *et al.*, 2013) pursue the concept of 'embedding' academic skills within other modules so that specific study and generic employability skills are developed experientially whilst students are developing knowledge and understanding of their core subject. This approach develops learning in a time appropriate, progressive and holistic manner throughout the degree course.

Johnston (2010, p.76) comments that although the modularisation of course structures has been one of the innovative aspects of curriculum design in recent times, for it to be of real benefit, attention must be paid to 'overall programme coherence'. The modules need to be linked and there needs to be a visible and easily understood relationship between them.

Concluding their comprehensive review of the literature into student engagement and curriculum design, Bovill, Bulley and Morss (2011) present a framework for the first year curriculum design process to raise engagement that contains the following elements; early assessment and feedback, working in small groups, academic skills integrated into curricula, co-operation and teamwork, relevance and real-life examples.

### *Assessment Design*

A key part of any curriculum design is the design of meaningful and appropriate assessments. Sambell (2013) argues that assessment has a significant influence on how students experience university life and what they gain from it.

The concept of Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been much discussed and it is generally agreed that it represents the move away from assessment being used to measure learning and achievement to seeing assessment as part of the learning process. Sambell (2013) sets out six conditions for developing assessment that meet the requirements of AfL and which also ensure learning occurs during and via the assessment process. She suggests that assessment needs to be; rich in formal feedback, rich in informal feedback, should provide opportunities for students to practise and try out skills before they are assessed in a summative way, be 'relevant and authentic' and represent more than just the opportunity to acquire marks, and that it should assist students develop independence and autonomy.

A similar approach to considering assessment as part of learning and not separate to it was put forward by Carless, Joughin and Liu in 2006. Learning-orientated assessment is summarised by them seeking to develop nine key skills; researching, higher order thinking, communication using technology, written and oral communication, working in teams, autonomous learning, self-evaluation and processing and acting on feedback. A synoptic approach, which links concepts across modules and disciplines, could be used to develop some of these skills and to engage students with learning.

Synoptic or capstone modules or projects have been used in the USA since the mid-1980s in an attempt to pull together learning at the end of a programme of study. More recently they have been introduced into the UK as a culminating experience that seeks to provide students with a retrospective experience and as a transition to life after university (De Vita, 2004). Durel (1993) cited by De Vita (2004) defined the completion of a synoptic module as a rite of passage when students change their status from undergraduate to graduate.

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Synoptic assessment has been defined as by the QAA (2006) as 'assessment that encourages students to combine elements of their learning from different parts of a programme and to show their accumulated knowledge and understanding of a topic or subject area'. It allows students to develop their ability to integrate and apply their skills and knowledge by using what they have learned in one part of a programme to increase understanding in other parts or across the programme as a whole.

Research into the use of such synoptic assessments in HE settings during the course of undergraduate level study (rather than overarching synoptic modules or capstone projects run at the end of a period of study) shows that they are not widely used. Pharmacy and computer science have used them successfully to address learning outcomes from more than one module within one piece of assessed work (see, for example, Richardson *et al.*, 2014) but there is little evidence of them being used in a business and management context. Yet, the ability to synthesise and link information is a key requirement to demonstrate higher level learning as defined both in Bloom's original taxonomy (1956) and in its revised form (Anderson, Krathwohl *et al.*, 2001 cited in Krathwohl, 2002) and of graduate employers (Hopkins, Raymond and Carlson, 2012).

### *Conclusions from the Literature Review*

It became clear from carrying out the literature review that any element of the curriculum designed specifically to engage and develop academically weaker, non-traditional students needed to:

- see the modules of study undertaken as being related and interlinked (Johnston, 2012)
- allow them to become interested in learning and want to devote time and energy to achieving this (Johnston, 2012; Bovill, Bulley and Morss, 2011; Bryson and Hand, 2007)
- provide early opportunities for social integration with peers by working together and contact and support from staff (Pampaka, Williams and Hutcheson, 2012; Hughes and Smail, 2013)
- assist them in developing skills for both study *and* employment in a timely and embedded way as well as develop intellectual capacity (Wingate, 2006; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009; Groves *et al.*, 2013)
- utilise a variety of relevant and appropriate assessment methods that would provide regular and timely feedback and feedforward opportunities and which allows linkages and connections to be made between modules and units of study (Carless, Joughin and Liu, 2006; Sambell, 2013, Bovill, Bulley and Morss, 2011).

### **The resultant assessment design**

Following this investigation into the literature, the following design elements were incorporated.

#### *A linked and more coherent curriculum*

In an attempt to move away from a structure where each module stood alone, and in order to develop greater coherence (Johnston, 2011), it seemed appropriate to consider the creation of a synoptic module that would allow material from all the different disciplines to be studied together (De Vita, 2004). As these are used to assist students transition from education to employment, it could follow that such an approach might be used effectively to help students transition from school to university and facilitate the move towards being independent learners.

However, reflecting on the needs of this group of low level, non-traditional students, this could risk reducing engagement due to feelings of being overwhelmed. It was therefore decided to bring the schemes of work of just two level four modules into line with each other to make the most of synergies and repetition. Lecturers within both disciplines are able to cross reference materials covered and demonstrate to students the holistic nature of the curriculum and business in general.

### *Creating a synoptic assessment*

Once the teaching of the content of both modules was synchronised, it became clear that it was possible to create an innovative synoptic assessment, which, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as one which assesses learning outcomes from two different modules. Addressing learning outcomes from both modules would enable the ongoing reinforcement of the links between them and reduce the assessment burden on students in their first semester. If timetabled appropriately, it would allow for early feedback to act as feedforward for later assignments. It was also hoped that such an assessment would help with the transition in the attitude of students away from that of being passive consumers of teaching and towards being active, engaged and independent learners (De Vita, 2004).

In order to address social integration issues early in the programme of study; to allow experiential learning of one of a main topics of one module (Working in Groups and Teams), and to develop a key employability skill (Lowden *et al.*, 2011; CBI, 2015), it was decided that this should be a group assessment. The important skills of planning, negotiation, compromise and listening are developed by working in this way (Carless, Joughin and Liu, 2006), all of which are vital in both education and in the world of work.

The assessment is research orientated in order to embed vital study skills (Wingate, 2006) such as identifying, accessing and using appropriate information, referencing and critical thinking. In order to make the assessment relevant and realistic (Bryson and Hand, 2007), it has been framed in a business context and to further develop this theme, the required output is a business report. For most students, is their first exposure to such a document. It also provides the opportunity to develop other study and employability skills; note taking, drafting, editing and proof reading, in an embedded, timely and relevant way (Wingate, 2006, Groves *et al.*, 2013).

Regular workshop sessions are scheduled to allow ongoing formative feedback regarding progress from both staff and other students (Samball, 2013). Coming before the final submission, this feedback is also able to be used as feedforward which allows students to make use of it to 'bridge the gap between current and desired performance' (Carless, Joughin and Liu, 2006, p.12). It was hoped that such sessions would provide opportunities for staff to get to know their students and to develop useful working relationships with them which is key to ensuring smooth transition to university (Hughes and Snail, 2006) and would mirror the experiences many had enjoyed in school settings where teaching groups are smaller.

### **Results and critical discussion**

Having now run the module for two cohorts of students, evaluation of the synoptic assessment is underway with the aim of establishing whether it can impact the engagement levels of lower level students and whether intellectual and skills development can be successfully incorporated within it. The discussion below sets out what has been learned from the experience so far.

#### *Student perspectives*

The majority of students in the pilot group (69%) felt that, given a choice between synoptic and single assessments (assessments that focus on one module) they preferred synoptic. The reasons for this were varied. 31% of this majority stated that this preference was due to the reduction in the amount of assessment at this level, another 31% of the majority stated that it was because it allowed linkages to be made between modules and the remaining 7% stated that it was because of both the reduction in assessment **and** the linkages.

What is encouraging is that the entire pilot group felt that both employability and academic skills had been developed as a result of carrying out the synoptic assessment. Just over half of the

respondents stated that they had developed 'a lot' and just under half stated that it was 'a little' but this illustrates the problem of subjective understanding of such vague statements (Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2008) and needs to be explored further.

The data gathered from the open questions asked was valuable. Comments such as; 'I enjoyed gaining various perspectives on topics which enriched the assignment'; 'it was good to see the relationships between what we learn about'; 'it made learning about them more interesting and relevant'; 'it linked concepts and ideas together' along with 'you could relate both topics to that one assignment and to business' and 'it makes more sense to link the topics from different modules as it will work that way in the real world' suggest that engagement levels were positively affected and that the aim of students viewing the curriculum as a coherent whole, rather than as a set of separate modules, may be being achieved.

Echoing a concern of the staff involved, one respondent did comment that the synoptic assignment had allowed them to get 'a better mark in a class I did not like as opposed to doing a separate assignment'.

#### *Staff perspectives*

Staff comments fell into three main groups; practical and logistical issues, the impact of the assessment on teaching practices and their perceived impact on student development. Positive comments made relate to the practicalities of setting assessments, marking and the delivery of feedback.

The main advantage cited by all staff has been the reduction in the amount of marking required by a piece of group coursework. Given that the assignment is set at the start of the first semester of study, and that it is worked on alongside the teaching of core concepts and themes rather than being completed once teaching is complete, it has also been possible to move the submission date forward in the academic calendar. This has meant that the marking load of staff is spread throughout the year rather than being bunched towards the end of each semester. From the students' perspective, this has meant that the work is returned to them much earlier and so the concept of feedforward, where comments can be used to improve later submissions in other modules, is a real possibility and is actively encouraged by staff.

All the staff involved reported that the workshop sessions, when students were able to work on their assignments and receive formative feedback, had provided a very real opportunity to get to know individual students better and to develop teaching and facilitation interventions that suited the specific needs of such learners. They had also allowed for timely, small-group, remedial type sessions to take place, often around a specific area such as referencing or what constitute appropriate and reliable information or data. Two staff did comment that they had been aware of the initial frustration of some students who felt undirected and unsure at the start but that in workshop sessions they had been able to reassure and facilitate the interpretation of the brief and its specific requirements and that this had alleviated these emotional responses before they appeared to affect engagement levels.

The embedded development of some key skills has worked well for all staff. Students appear to have developed their writing skills in terms of style and structure and seem much more confident in terms of what is expected of them. It was noted that group working had been experienced in both a positive and negative way. The majority had to deal with conflict at some stage in the process and so developed resolution strategies, negotiation, problem solving, leadership and listening skills. Their time management, planning and organisational skills were also called upon which adds weight



to the assertion that the embedding of skills and the experiential nature of learning about them, has been of value.

However, it must also be noted that a stand-alone study skills module is still running alongside as the fourth key module at level four as the embedding of all the required study and employability skills has not yet been fully achieved. The gap between students' skill levels when they arrive and university expectations of them is still too large and remedial work is still required. Whilst the embedding of literacy skills has been more successful, it has proved a challenge to cover numeracy skills and these are a key requirement for successful transition to level five modules which cover accounting and finance.

The engagement levels of students, as measured by attendance and as perceived by staff, appears to have been high for both year groups. The fact that on-going help and support was provided at workshops and that the material covered in more traditional teaching sessions was immediately required and was directly applicable to the required output, meant that most attended each session. Due to the work being carried out in a group, the submission rates for this assessment have been high. 96% of the pilot group have completed the assignment. The marks awarded for the assessment have been reasonable given the low level of academic achievement of the students involved and the timing of it at the start of the first semester of study. The average marks given were 40% in 2013-14 and 50% in the academic year 2014-15. Given the innovative nature of the assignment, it is not possible to usefully compare these marks with those awarded in previous years when the assignments focussed on different learning outcomes and were submitted later in the academic year when more skills had been developed and there was a greater understanding of required levels and expectations. The higher marks achieved in 2014-15 can, in part, be attributed to greater understanding of the requirements by staff involved in the modules.

There are some practical concerns raised by several staff which need addressing. It was noted that some students passed both modules despite their knowledge in one being noticeably weaker. Also, the mark gained for the assessment was used to credit both modules. To limit the impact of this, the weighting of the synoptic assignment has been kept low (25%) for both modules to ensure that this is not a problem at programme level but it needs further consideration.

### **Limitations of the pilot study**

There are several clear limitations to this pilot study which need to be addressed in further research. The main issue is the sample size and the type of students who responded to the questionnaire. They were self-selecting and so represent a skewed sample. As it was distributed in paper form, only those students who were in attendance completed it and it could be argued that these represent the most engaged within the cohort. In future it would be worth emailing it out to the entire group, creating a larger sample size. As completion would still be voluntary, this would not, however, address the issue of the less engaged students taking part.

The evaluation was conducted several months after the assignment was completed and so the reliability of students' memory cannot be taken to be a necessarily accurate reflection of their experiences and attitudes at the time (Hughes and Smail, 2014).

It would now be beneficial to conduct a series of focus groups with students shortly after the assessment has been submitted but before the marks are published to avoid over positive or overly negative emotions influencing the comments made. This would be appropriate because it would allow a shared understanding of the questions to be established rather than the subjective interpretation that has occurred using questionnaires (Litosseliti, 2003). During the discussion students would be free to focus on three broad questions, such as; 'what did you enjoy about the

dual assessment', 'what did you find useful about it?' and 'what did you dislike about it?' rather than being presented with a list of pre-determined responses provided by the researcher and having to choose the most appropriate.

Going forward, it would be advantageous to involve students at the start of the implementation of any new design element or intervention in order to encourage them to regard themselves as practitioner-researchers (Whitehead, 2015). In this way they would understand that they can create their own narrative and add their voice to the literature which influences educational practice. Their motivation to report on their findings and to discuss their experiences would be greater and this should create a much richer data stream.

### **Conclusions and implications for the future**

The main rationale for developing a synoptic assessment that addressed learning outcomes from two separate modules was to engage lower level students, assist with transition to HE and to develop academic and employability skills. From the results achieved thus far, it can be argued that the approach has been successful in meeting these needs. Students have found the assessment challenging and interesting due to it linking concepts together in a coherent way and have appreciated the development of independent learning skills which can be employed within the world of work. Staff have seen an improvement in students' ability to work collaboratively, source, evaluate and use appropriate sources and to write in a clear and focussed way.

There is already some work underway to try and further develop the concept of a holistic curriculum. The possibility of linking the teaching of core level four topics, for example communication, is being considered and other linked, if not yet fully synoptic assessments are in development. The development of a marking scheme which allows for different marks to be awarded to the two modules is being worked on and will need to be piloted and further evaluated. It is hoped that others may now consider developing holistic curricula and synoptic assessments in order to promote greater coherence within the syllabus and to develop essential skills so that it may be evaluated more widely.

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